

Remarks: Senator Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.)

Gila Wild and Scenic Press Call

May 12, 2020

Thank you, Senator Udall in particular for all his great work on this legislation.

And thank you, everyone, for joining us today for the announcement of our introduction of the M.H. Dutch Salmon Greater Gila Wild and Scenic River Act.

If any place deserves Wild and Scenic River designation, it's New Mexico's Gila River.

But before I tell you why, you may be wondering, why, during these times—when our nation remains gripped by a pandemic that is taking so many American lives and our entire economy has ground to a crawl—why are we moving forward with introducing this major conservation bill?

Let me tell you why.

First, I'd answer with the words of one of our nation's founding conservationists, President Teddy Roosevelt.

Roosevelt said "Conservation means development as much as it does protection."

And he was right.

More than 100 years since we began implementing Teddy Roosevelt's vision for conservation, we have seen time and again that the very act of protecting our public lands and waters can serve as one of our greatest economic drivers.

And some of our nation's greatest periods of long-lasting conservation legacies came after economic downturns like the Great Depression and the Great Recession.

Thanks in large part to the last decade of conservation victories in New Mexico, the outdoor recreation industry was fueling some of our fastest job growth, particularly in our rural communities, just before the pandemic hit.

I strongly believe that part of our broad economic recovery and, in an even truer sense, our national renewal must come from investing in the future for places that make us who we are as New Mexicans and as Americans.

Investing in infrastructure in our public lands by fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund, by passing the bipartisan Restore Our Parks Act, by fixing the maintenance backlog in our national parks, forests, and refuges will create jobs in the short-term and create new opportunities for our tourism economy for years to come.

And we can't stop working to protect the remaining special places on the map.

Especially in these times, we need to place an even higher value on protecting the places that sustain our way of life.

New Mexicans have always understood that water is life.

We know how vital managing this precious resource is to preserving our economy, our environment, our traditions, and our culture.

There are very few places left where you can understand what that truly means.

I can think of no greater example than the headwaters of the Gila—a place that has been near and dear to my heart and special to so many New Mexicans.

The upper Gila and San Francisco rivers are some of the last truly naturally-flowing tributaries of the greater Colorado River watershed.

The headwaters of the Gila have long been home to indigenous cultures, including the Mogollon, Mimbres, and Apache.

Nearly 100 years ago, this spectacular landscape and the ecosystems shaped by these waters inspired the establishment of the United States' first wilderness area.

It was the visionary leadership of Aldo Leopold that called for wilderness protections in the Gila National Forest and served as the model in the decades to come for the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 that was steered in the Senate by our state's own Senator Clinton Anderson.

As long as I have lived in New Mexico, I have always been drawn to the Gila.

Trips into places like McKenna Park, Turkey Feather Pass, and the Jerky Mountains have given me the time and space to grow closer to my family and friends and to reflect on what is truly important.

The wilderness characteristics of these places only exist today because of the foresight of those who came before us.

In the years since Leopold first called for wilderness protection for wild lands, we have also grown to appreciate the need to conserve our wild waters.

That's why Congress and the Johnson administration acted in 1968 to pass the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

It is incredibly meaningful to partner with my colleague and friend Senator Udall to introduce this bill.

Tom has long worked to continue the conservation legacy of his father, Stewart Udall, who served as the Secretary of the Interior under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Near the very end of his final year at Interior, Secretary Stewart Udall helped usher through the landmark National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

This bipartisan law allows us to conserve segments of rivers with outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values in a free-flowing condition for future generations.

For treasured rivers across the country, this type designation has helped bring about enhancement of water quality and also economic development and increased recreation opportunities.

That's been true in New Mexico's Rio Chama, the East Fork of the Jemez, and sections of the Rio Grande and the Pecos.

It's long past time that we recognize that the greater Gila and San Francisco watershed deserves this same recognition and treatment.

Wild and scenic designation will permanently protect the Gila's free-flowing segments, attract more visitors to southwestern New Mexico, and grow our outdoor recreation industry.

Our bill would permanently protect the extraordinary scenic values found along many of these river segments.

It would permanently protect the fish and wildlife habitat for unique native species like the Gila Trout and the Gila chub.

Wild and scenic designation would enhance recreation opportunities like hunting, fishing, hiking, and rafting.

And it would still allow for continued traditional uses such as grazing and irrigating.

Our legislation preserves existing water rights, private land rights, and current public access points to these segments.

We have worked hard to build consensus, take input from local stakeholders, and take the time to make sure we got this legislation right.

I'm proud that our legislation has widespread support from local stakeholders and community leaders in southwestern New Mexico.

I want to be sure to acknowledge all of the New Mexicans who have devoted themselves to protecting the Gila.

I also want to take a moment to recognize some New Mexicans who literally dedicated their lives to these waters.

That includes Ella Jaz Kirk, Michael Mahl, and Ella Myers.

These three young New Mexicans from Silver City were true champions for this river.

On May 23, 2014, these three students of Aldo Leopold Charter School took off in a plane to conduct aerial research over the Gila National Forest.

They had worked as part of an ecological monitoring team on the upper watersheds of the Gila learning about changes from recent fires and floods.

All three of these classmates and friends spent their lives exploring and sharing their love of the Gila River.

I am deeply sad that I never had the opportunity to meet the three of them.

All three died in a tragic plane crash, while they were serving the wilderness and river they loved.

I keep a photo of them in my office here in D.C. as an inspiration for this work, and I have met with each of their mothers who have continued their children's call to protect the Gila.

The three mothers came together to cope with their grief. They decided to boat down stretches of the Gila River that their children had cherished.

I've spoken with each of them about how powerful it would be to protect these stretches of water as wild and scenic for future generations.

That's what this river means to New Mexicans.

That's why this legislation is so important.

And finally, I want to say just a little bit about the man we are naming this legislation after.

I first met Dutch Salmon when I was an outfitter guide in the 1990s.

A longtime nature writer in Silver City, and even longer time avid fisherman.

Dutch was such a consistent voice for the Gila River.

He was kind and respectful to all points of view, but we was always a staunch defender of his “favorite fishing hole.”

In the wake of efforts to divert and dam the Gila in the 1980s, Dutch helped found the Gila Conservation Coalition.

He and the coalition successfully stood up against multiple attempts to de-water the Gila River.

If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to close with just a few of Dutch’s words about the Gila:

“We have been gifted a wild river with a self-sustaining sport fishery, a number of rare endemic species, and perhaps the best birding in the Southwest, most all of it on public land...Unlike any other river in New Mexico, the Gila is still allowed to pulse, slack, sigh, roar, and rejuvenate itself in ways we are just beginning to understand. This is the last flow in New Mexico that can teach us what a natural river should look like.”

Hard to put it much better than that.

As we know Dutch passed away in March last year.

I can’t think of any better way to honor his memory and all of the New Mexicans who have fought so hard for the Gila than permanent protection of this wild and scenic river.